Teacup Cemetery

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Poems by Mia Bachman

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for Caro,
mi compañera, wife, and best friend

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“what did i know, what did i know
of love’s austere and lonely offices?”
—robert hayden

i.

the adoption

angel statues

i remember prying at their resin heads,
assuming that they would just pop loose

like the heads of barbies, and how their
flat hair rested tight against their bodies,

how the robes, the limbs, hair and face
felt no different from any other part,

and the way they seemed to care for me
with open arms at a reasonable distance.

i thought they were idols to worship,
that the spirits of my parents traveled

between the statues placed all around
the house, so they could watch me grow

from anywhere, so they could keep me
safe—that my parents were bound by

god to watch over us, because nonnie
said that love was bound to the heart,

that the hearts of those who are gone
float up to heaven and come back down

whenever we are looking for the people
we love to save us. i wanted to throw

them to the floor one by one, to search

the rubble for the heart that contained

my parent's faces, cheek-to-cheek, like
a black and white picture in a locket.

instead, i picked each up and shook it,
like guessing what's inside a present.

judgment day

tear down the towers of your souls!
some curly-gray haired fancy suit
says, raising his gavel like an eagle
soaring, glowing like an angel in
a renaissance painting. my mom
and dad sit in separate pews—
he knows by now that he isn't
my biological father. he doesn't
want me. he wants my mom to
suffer, wants to keep me as his
right, his privilege. she wants
nothing to do with me, willingly
takes money from her parents
so they can keep me. my body
was purchased: it had a number
for the purpose of trading, defined
the worth of the rest of my life.
nonnie became my mother—*rick*
became another absent father,
and a chasm opened in the earth:
hell's stereotypical demons poured
forth, imps, serpents, seraphim,
animatronic and friendly, like
the dummies at *chuck-e-cheese,*
singing about the *end,* as if life
was some didactic lesson failed
by all of us, and we were required
by divine law to await our fates.

we all moved on with our lives
with the ease passengers have

exiting a train—knowing our
destinations aren't too far away,
relying on signs to point us in
the right direction—and though
hell's chasm never fully closed,
and the demons hovered around
us in every motion that we made,
each of us made the best of love,
treated our lullabies as a sign
to welcome loss and heartache.

toy spiders

a red-eyed toy tarantula
placed in the center
of the living room
on trailer home carpet,

the sick underbelly of the walls
        eating through the brown paint
like sunburnt, peeling skin.

i screamed at the spider
and my *papa* gave his
boisterous italian laugh,
like the world couldn't
live without it.
        my eyes don't leave
the spider. he picks it up
                and shakes it,
it's fake-hairy legs jangling
like rattling ornaments:

oh, what are you cryin' for!
it's not real! look, touch it!

what if it crawls, bites?

i ran to the wall,
careful to scan it
before touching
in case of *spiders*,

crawling, nesting,

webbing in wait:

my great grandma
watched, quiet
and reserved, said
she loved us
only in italian.

papa lived only one year
after she passed: they said
he died of a *broken heart,*
but i didn't believe them;

the conniving spider's plot
was to poison them both,
kill them one year apart
so it wasn't suspicious.

when we went to clean out
the trailer, nonnie pulled
all their old stuff out onto
the street; as she moved

in and out, i searched
between cardboard folds
for toy spiders, lying
in wait to bite anyone
who spoke *their* tongue;

i thought
italian was a spider
language, something
the *old* in my family
spoke to keep hundreds

of spiders from seeping
through the walls.

when i think now of
the family i've lost,
i hear the wallpaper
peeling, and wish
i held the language
to calm what's

breaking through,
real or not.

shapeshifting

"maybe if i eat dog food, i'll become a dog!"
—tommy pickles, *rugrats*

if i took one bite
of my parent's
brains, i'd learn
why they left,

become a zombie
chasing their tombs,
clawing at the dirt
in search of flesh,
hoping the corpses
remained fresh;

like the rugrats, with one
taste my speech will morph
to cries, maggots will sift
inside my skin, i'll learn
what this flesh means.

tommy, let's discover
what secrets they keep;
let's learn what it's like
to be free, able to reach
the doorknob and leave.

come; let's eat.

we'll turn into
something
they love.

four years old

in the early morning hours
artificial backyard light pierced
through the sliding glass door
of my grandparent's home,
sharpened by the pergola's
breaks in wood, like necrotic
hands, mom's hair shielded
me from the beams of light
as she knocked on the glass,
a fortress of auburn ropes.

she brought another vhs,
stole popcorn from the pantry,
complained about the loud
microwave, snuck me upstairs
by the hand, and put whatever
film she had into the vcr:

texas chainsaw massacre,
nightmare on elm street,
friday the thirteenth?

we watched them all
over the many mornings,
the fear and gore spread
over us like too much
peanut butter on bread.

whenever we paused,
we went into the bathroom
where she'd offer me reese's,

tic tac's, m&m's, raw honey.

i remember their bodies
hung from windowsills,
their bones sticking out,
live flesh torn and eaten,
screams, walls of blood.

and her laugh, her smile:
how she was happy to be
alive with me.

easter egg hunt

was it a mental institution, or rehab?
i remember children waiting to see
their parents, a doctor shouting,
ready? go! watching the other kids
run, looking everywhere for eggs
already in obvious places, splayed out
in the open, how could these kids care
more about plastic eggs than their own
parents? alone, watching, a nurse
led me to an egg on the grass, picked
it up for me, placed it in my paralyzed
palms. i was supposed to open it
to see her. that was the key. i pulled
out the hershey kiss, squished
the melty-wrapped chocolate between
my fingers, refused to eat my candy
like the other kids: it was a gift.

when the doctor let the parents in,
kids flooded to meet them: hugs everywhere,
so many hugs and smiles and laughs
i thought i was watching a movie.
if i'm in the movie, mom will come out,
she'll take me away from here, she'll
love me. and she did come out, just
as the rest of the parents were leaving;
she cried: *i'm sorry, baby, i'm sorry.*
she hugged me, then turned from me;
a doctor walked her out the door.

i held the hershey kiss in the car

and for the first time felt
my heart break: it was chocolate
melting in my palm.

goodwill parking lot

my mother in the parking lot
in the morning with cheap toys
waiting for grandpa to drop
her kids off:
                she smiles sickly
from the high   and smells
like endless nights.
                my babies,
she says, and hands us over
the rear window our toys:

for megan, a rocking chair;
for me, jim carrey's *the mask*.

without a word, grandpa
drives away. mom calls out
something i can't remember
over her tears: *wait,* i think,
in a long, strained whisper.

princess in a silver tower

on mom's meth addiction

she sits in a tower guarded
by a dragon's green flames,
too stubborn to free climb

down. the stone pockets are
clearly outlined in rainbow,
the beta placed in masonry.

she is comfortable looking
out the panoramic window
over the miasmic pastures

of her past, a search layered
with *forget* and *emptiness*,
the way one misremembers

themselves in a recurring
dream, a kingdom protecting
her from her own healing—

call all the doctors, pack them
into cannons, light the fuses
and watch them like fireworks

splatter into the stones, cover
all the rainbow pockets red,
fill what remains with flakes

of bone, order the animals

to eat clean the scraps left,
let them all join in an effort

to save her: how can one living
in such a confined space still
find a way to keep running?

so i offer the one thing i can
trapped as i am so far below,
the flames crackling threats

as her defenses pour across
every part of her land: a place
in my heart, one reserved

for the mother who carried
me up that tower with her,
who dissipated the miasma

over her world to show me
what i should have done to
help her, who rappelled with

me back down to the earth,
back to the days left behind,
who took my hand and led me

home.

willow and oak

after mom

it's easiest to imagine us
as trees,

our leaves
& trunks different shades.

we planted our souls in
youth, as

an example
to compare our growth.

i watched your tree
hunch

over, bent
by the weight of living.

you watched mine
vomit,

try to stab
itself in the kitchen.

i blamed what's
visible,

let roots
fester with disease.

i'm sorry for what
was left unattended.

i'll pull the weeds,
water our roots.

monkey bars

mom held the knife to my stomach and asked

if i knew what happened when guts spilled out:

you know, you can use the long intestine as a noose
to watch them dangle from trees in their own filth.

in ninth grade, mask quoted a story from *totse*
to two kids bullying me, stating what happens

to a cat every fifteen seconds of the five minutes
it could survive being nuked inside a microwave.

it was then i learned their eyeballs pop and sizzle,
fur melts, claws condense into themselves, a body

leaks its own entrails, as if all the body meant
by death is marking the final place it stood.

when our cat bob was dying, vomiting, shitting
all over the house, mom drove him two hours

out into the desert, left him wandering alone,
fibbing that he had *miraculously disappeared.*

at seven, when mom was finally granted weekend
visitation, we'd drive over to her boyfriend's home,

the quiet zones between that absent neighborhood
and my grandparent's house an infinite white space

unexplored. her boyfriend mimicked the emptiness
of his home, a stoic construction composed of sinister

longing, his face / the walls blanker than the moon,
his face the force of walls collapsing me; entombed.

when buyers contacted him, he'd slink out to hide
inside the fiberglass barrier of their four door cars,

bringing back with him a satisfied walk and pockets
heavy enough to weigh his jeans through the floor.

between all the *n-word that's* and *wet-b's this*, he'd
take me to the closet in the back of the dark room

while mom, in her hypnagogic, methamphetamine
haze, stargazed absently through the roof of her bed.

i don't actually have to tell you what happened in that
closet, or that the knife my mother held wasn't at all

literal, or why i fear the forceful push of rough hands
pressing my back through silent hallways in the dark,

that being forced to face the wall is another metaphor
for working against yourself, or that fear commanded

by a mother is like a child dangling from monkey bars;
the weight of it, a blade lurking beneath the woodchips.

brown carpet

the carpet may as well be sand
grinding its way into our noses,
a wild-fired bulbous burst of bile,
yellow, grimy, sick to the touch.

we protect us from the dark:
carpet grading at the stomach,
hairy hand clenching the ankle,
red burns melting away our skin.

and when we didn't listen, pain
like static noises clipping into
each other, making flesh ripple
and tear like an eager disease,

then calling out for *god,* just as
those who cared had taught us;
then imagining he watched from
inside the walls, a silent witness.

the body in pieces

the woods we're in
are lovely, dark, and
i promise dad that i
won't let out a peep.

his driver guards
the open trunk,
makes me promise
not to look inside
when he goes pee:

i see an arm wrapped
tight in clear plastic,
and a leg, no—blood?

part of my body remains
standing on that road,
scanning the dark for
my dad's return, as if
he stayed hidden with
what he had hidden,
buried somewhere deep
with and without me,

and another part is here,
writing a poem about
the body without a torso
or a head, and how it was
buried somewhere deep,
with and without me.

the blob that ate everyone

during second grade silent reading time,
i stared at the cover of a *goosebumps* book,

an open-mouthed pink blob eating a town,
and thought about our naked bodies on its

tongue, drenched as it swallowed our class,
our clothes dissolving in its stomach acids,

its slimy spit, all of us naked in its belly,
unable to turn away from one another

trapped in a pink ocean of decomposition
where we could laugh, play, and talk

as if we were friends until fully digested,
our bodies turning into clumps of flesh,

and the pink blob eating on after us,
adding to its belly billions more,

just as it swallowed those before us,
so we wouldn't be alone again.

as a child

i used to break
pencils
when i couldn't
write

i used to
break
pen cils
        when i
couldn't

write

        i used to
        as a child
BREAK
(pencils)
                when i COULDN'T
(write/write)—used to
break BREAK
        pEnCilS
when i
                (breathing now)
couldn't—LET ME HEAR YOU
        say it (now)
couldn't
write
        like
i couldn't
write
        something (broken)

the pencils who
        couldn't   write
when
        all voices stop
    couldn't   there was
something   write
        something   that couldn't
        words and in them
        words
that something   couldn't write
        the voices (broken)
        the pencils
between thumb and   forefinger
        couldn't

lemons

"…the growth and consolidation of the sicilian mafia is strongly associated with an exogenous shock in the demand for lemons after 1800, driven by james lind's discovery on the effective use of citrus fruits in curing scurvy."
—arcangelo dimico, alessia isopi and ola olsson

my mom would pick lemons from our neighbor's tree,
searching between the bark and green for soft yellow
ripe as a newborn's first dream. she'd wait for night,
reach over our backyard wall shining her flashlight,
and say, "let the cops come; i doubt they've noticed
anyway." night after night she'd think, after all those
lemons overflowing from a bowl by the kitchen sink
roasted orange in the sunlight in the passing weeks,
"if they've begun to notice, they haven't said a thing."
i wanted to warn her that stealing lemons is a crime
punishable by death; i wanted to warn her to throw
them in the garbage disposal, flip the light-switch on,
let some gutter monster deal with them, and be done.
when she asked me to walk around the corner to steal
lemons off another neighbor's tree, how could i refuse?
i climbed up the wall, searching among the canopied
leaves and branches by flashlight, silver spires of light
refracting off pitch-black fruit, unaware the difference
between wrong and ripe: between their skin and mine.

sidewalk

roller skating with wrist guards
wasn't so bad; when i fell, i'd land
wrist-first, shoulders shaking, then
get up again. in the stockton heat,
everything was pretty—the neighbor's
trees shaded me when i fell, their
windows looked on me with glee.
i don't know why i fell on purpose.
perhaps because there was no pain;
i knew that i would catch myself,
as i always had, that i would shield
myself from pain. but the purple
bumpers of the pads were scratched
on the concrete, worn down over
months, like ground down teeth.

my fake dad never watched me fall.

he sat quietly in his bed watching
tv, a belly-aching husk who wished
i was his blood-born son and not
a promise broken by the woman
he loved. his belly was a cushion
that shielded me from the world
when i hugged him, but his grip
ran loose along my back, like
a malfunctioning rock-climbing
harness. he purchased my purple
wrist and knee pads to protect me
from scarring and breaking, made
threats against my body for not

being able to reverse time, for not
binding myself to him by name:

he wanted what i wanted: to protect
us from the things we couldn't
understand. so i fell whenever
he wasn't watching, to prove
that i was okay with hugging
sidewalk instead.

microphone radio

1998: there was a no-internet white box computer in my dad's stockton duplex with a flimsy gray microphone on a stand. my little sister and i opened a recording program and made our own radio show: mia and megan's show! too much disney channel, too many long car rides. we thought we could really make something of it—bonding, i mean—we thought recorded words would cement ourselves in the present, for all the world to hear one day, if we could ever get it out there. fake dad looked on from the kitchen, laughed a little—*listen!* we begged*, come, look!*—he said, "i heard you already; i wanna lay down." for hours of our summers, it was only us, in a time where nothing we said was nonsense, in a time where everything we said meant, *in the future, we'll have each other.*

2017: i visit my dad alone, to be with him while he undergoes radiation therapy for throat cancer, only months before i find out we aren't blood. he walks me into the old duplex, which he's getting ready to rent out. i explore the kitchen, run my hand along the 1950s walls, the diamond-shaped door handles, see the unkempt bed he laid all day on. i turn on the computer: the recordings are there. "i'm throwing it all out—it's useless now." remember, for you, it's been seconds: you need not hear our voices. you've heard children blabber nonsense a thousand times. now, ask yourself, if you can tell, in all that nonsense, whether they love each other.

2021: my sister's wedding is in october. i've received the invitation, haven't responded. haven't called dad, sister, most family in months: some of them, years. the computer is gone; the voices, high-pitched and whirly, ring only in memory. if i could record the years here, simply, like their own

photographs, if photos can be made from words, i can't—i—can't. the times that weren't summer, where my dad still laid in bed, three-hundred-eighty-six miles away from us—i can't record how separated we were, sleeping in our own rooms, staring at our own technological screens—i can't, know—if voices, over distance, over time, can be saved long enough to reach each other;

how can we know what memories are— worth?

the abacus, the ruler

we weigh our heart in right hand
and measure its worth in the left,
adding with the abacus beads
on grandma veil's desk, and hope
it weighs *small*—that the heart
is simply overfull, like a marble
drenched in dark matter—hope
that it will drip itself dry as we
drag the body it makes heavy

to the back porch, the body we lie
on the concrete yard, the summer
heat drawing fault lines on our back,
our skin cracking, reducing cells
into steam rising into the sky, until
we melt into a pool of red mush,
and we boil like water in the sun,
and merge with the air, weightless,

when grandma val sprays us with
a hose, asks why we're burning
ourselves on the ground: *finishing*
measurements! so we stand and run,
and count the steps we take running,
our body like light stretching across
the world, measuring all it loves.

my nightmares are love

in sleep, i hold my mom
as she hangs my clothes

on nonnie's closet rack
sometime after adoption;

this must be visiting hours
during a peaceful time, when

mom isn't banging on the front
door, screaming, crying, when

my grandparents haven't called
the cops, and when mom hasn't

disappeared and the blue suits
with shiny badges aren't asking

the same questions as i am
in the house her and i both

ran from, the house we left
so that we might understand

what love could be like outside
of it. she never had to tell me

about her monsters; they were
the same ones in my dreams—

they took on the shape of horrors

made from misunderstood fears

passed between us—it's the same
shape they take now, the shape

of her and i existing quietly
in the same space together.

ii.

the wound

teacups

mr. bonsall told us in 9th grade
that some people are like teacups:

you can pour an infinite amount
of love into them, but, if there's

even a single crack, they'll be
impossible to fill. i was afraid

that i'd turned into a teacup;
i ran my hands over my body

searching for holes or cracks,
thinking i could patch them

if only i could find them. i asked
whoever loved me to help search,

forcing their time and effort
into fixing me,

creating cracks
in places there weren't any—

i told people i didn't love that
i loved them, never considering

the ways it might crack them;
i think now it's best that i find

someone else who needs filling,

someone who will let their leaks

fall over a garden with me, so
what may still blossom can grow.

i won't lie to you; what we need now
is to look to each other like nets,

to let love leak through holes made
small enough to catch anything.

lake tahoe wedding

there was an artificial beach
with artificial waves meant
to replicate an ocean that my
cousins and i never swam in;

all day i thought about
the water, how it ebbed
and subsided, the calm
like a soft hand soothing
a wound on my heart.

my mom wore her white dress
as i walked her down the aisle
wishing i was the flower girl
and her tears fell on my hand
that she was holding for the
first time. she leaned forward

and asked me if it really was
okay that she was marrying
greg, if i approved of him, like
what i said mattered. i wanted
to feel her heart in my hands
and stop the torrent flooding
her eyes, so i shrugged:

yes, mom, it's okay with me.

why did she ask me that?

i let go of her hand at the end

of the line and stood looking
over the rows of seats for
mine, stood in the aisle

until nonnie's hand directed
my body to the artificial lake:
i dipped my feet in first, then
my hands. and nonnie took
off her fancy shoes and stood
in the water with me, let
it wash over her ankles, ran
her palm along my back.

i was sure this was the closest
anyone could come to having
their heart touched.

i looked to nonnie with a smile
and asked her what i thought
i was supposed to: are you happy?

her body formed the tides,
made the lake an ocean:

happy i have you.

the sugar bowl

i once heard the tale
of a girl who left her
village to hide from
her mother, and kept

hidden for centuries.
she returned one day
filled with regret, and
asked the villagers,

where is my mother?
but the villagers held
no memory of them:
believing her crazed,

they tied her to a rock,
let her starve in the sun
until her body gave its
final sigh—

my mom would
dip fresh strawberries,
wet with sink water,
into a bowl of sugar,
ensure the stickiness
of powdery, sparkling
white over their skin,
and say, *the sweeter,*
the better—

the coroner

opened the girl's heart,
peeled back its layers
to examine its folds
in search of her age,
the way one searched
a tree stump's rings.

when they found no
evidence, they put
her heart to use as
a bowl, hardened it
in tree sap and syrup,
churned it over fire
to a rigid crispiness,
treated it with oils,
and passed it down
for generations—

when mom held the
strawberries to my
face, i turned away:
it's too much, i said.

and the sugar bowl
was left in the home
that i left, was lost
under layers of dust.

i cup my hands like
i'm waiting for rain:
they are a bowl filled
with white specks

that make a village

of little sugar people;
i lap them all up with
my tongue, carry them
in my mouth until
my children come:

they will be what's
left of our tradition,
a gift i'll regurgitate
when they are born.

the rv, the pendant

i. the rv

my bully came to mom's house
and i asked if he could go with
us on our beach camping trip.
we took the mobile home greg
had bought for cheap because
an old man who owned it died
on the bed; it smelled like gas
and sweat sunk into old wood.
i swore his ghost followed us.
now, the bully was my friend;
i hadn't known the difference
then between those who hurt
for gain and those who meant
well. on the way to the beach,
he poked my arms with tacks,
joked i had a *hairy-pizza-face*
because of my rampant acne
and peach-fuzz; i only stared
at his freckled-face and wide
belly, wondered why i didn't
love him. when we got there,
it was sunset. the ticket guy
said we could pay the fifteen
to park, but to stay overnight
we had to make a reservation.
greg made hot dogs; the bully
laughed and sulked while we
watched the sun set together
in lawn chairs, where i called

him by his name in a whisper:
“i’m sorry that we can’t stay,
cody.” the ketchup container
squirted tiny drops of liquid
over our charred, processed
meats. the cold seeped into
my thin hoodie. when we left,
i asked again if he wanted
to stay: “we can play *halo*,
watch movies on mom’s tv!”
the stars marked the path
his parent’s sedan drove
as they fled into the night
with him. i thought again
of being alone in the dark;
mom and greg went to bed
with smiles—i went home
to my grandparents, to bed,
and slept with all my ghosts
until sunrise, when i asked
if he wanted to play again.

ii. the pendant

trash-diggers. that’s what
kids called cody’s parents.
we sat at the kitchen table
with microwave tv dinners.
his mom’s mouth vacuumed
food, then her body left us.
his dad smiled with a beer
tall as his forearm. cody said
his sister had a pimply back
and that’s why no boys liked

her, why she hid inside her
room all day. i saw her once
emerge wet from a shower,
her skin pale and white as
a ghost. we watched *resident*
evil on his living room tv
and he paused the screen
on alice's bare right nipple,
laughed because he knew
his parents weren't around.
we never finished the film;
in his room, we played *halo*
on the split-screen late into
the night. he accused me of
screen-watching, and i was;
we tied our *slayer* matches
by numbers of wins, died
to plasma 'nades, hunters,
the flood in our *legendary*
campaign: the master chief
bodies, colored green, red,
or blue, sank to the floor
before being reborn again.
in the morning, we played
to knock the *warthogs* and
ghosts atop the *warsong*
gulch bases with well-timed
rockets and 'nades. it took
hours. i thought us working
together, what we achieved,
was best—that bending
the rules was alright with
a friend. when he went to
the bathroom, i knocked

all the vehicles back off
to the ground, laughed
as he walked in to see all
of our hard work undone.
he ripped the st. michael
necklace from my neck,
nickel and vatican-priest
blessed, and beat me with
it until it broke to pieces.
i searched his room and
couldn't find the pendant.
nonnie picked me up at
noon and asked about
the necklace. "i left it,"
i said. "well, we should
go back! it's expensive!"
—"no," i said, "i'll ask
my friend to bring it
to school on monday."
i sat next to cody in
english and he hit me
on my arm over and
over again: *charlie horse!*
you farted! you have to
call door-knob, call it!
we never talked about
the pendant: the ghosts,
which have stalked us
throughout our lives,
must have buried it in
some nameless tomb.

save them

two children were hogtied
in barbed leather straps.

i searched around the house
for the entity that bound them

as it examined my inquiries
behind its walls like a pest.

each wall dissolved to black
like open, unguarded portals,

and in them teeth emerged
as if they belonged to mouths,

jagged and not exactly right,
each holding its own soul.

on the wall behind the children,
one giant front tooth fluttered

like half a saloon door in wind.
where are your knives? i asked.

inside the children, it answered.
so i tied myself up with barbed

straps in plan to open myself:
to find a knife, cut them free.

goldfish

there was a plastic pond with lily-pads
and goldfish in mom's backyard. i picked
some of the goldfish up with a plastic net
and placed them gently on the grass.

they flopped around, begged for water.
some i sliced open along their stomachs,
others i cut in half with scissors—one,
i gouged out its eyes with a spoon.

i thought they might work differently
than us, watched as their mouths
bobbed open and closed, like speech.
they died the same as anyone, with

less noise and blood. they were just
like me, unable to speak of their
suffering, and i felt sorry for them:
i buried their corpses in our garden.

“the box”

in tenth grade i wrote “the box”
where a nameless character
was trapped in a white room
white walls no windows no doors

and nameless character ran
head-first into the white wall
over and over until it turned
red, to witness any color again.

a tiny robot mouse came to sweep
the feces and dirt from the floor;
there were no clocks, no hours,
the sense of time was taken.

i submitted it for the first time
two years later, to mr. fry’s 12th
grade english class, and he wrote
in red with no grade, *see me.*

i didn’t want to see the school
psychologist again. i didn’t
show. i went to and from class
quicker than a cleaning mouse.

two weeks later, mr. fry was
gone, absent from then on
the entire next semester. was
i to blame for not wanting

questions again? i wonder now

if he would have had good stuff
to say, or if he was concerned.
how could i admit to anyone

that i was drinking every day
i could get my hands on alcohol?
or that i'd self-harmed, attempted
suicide multiple times by then?

who could have helped anyway?

shane's bathroom (one of many parties)

this escape is the last thing i want,
the mirror reflects
only my heavy jacket, the noise outside
is comfortable in here,
over this sink, with tan walls and towels,

i keep walking in to escape, to isolate,
hoping no one hears me pee, or not pee;

i'm sixteen and fucked up, only getting drunker, higher,
wanting any kind of pill, hallucinogen;
i want to black out again and again.

so i go to shane's house
for the bathroom,
waiting for the walls to gleam
white, for the world
to become a black cocoon,
and

if i can still see my face,
this ugly male atrocity
of square jaw, pimples, unibrow,
sad delinquent eyes,
then i pelt my confidence with flaws,
and search for more to drink.

in the fishbowl

after nonnie's death

the light gleams from the front room,
morphs to distorted figures passing
in fixtures of color, like a stethoscope

piercing through the cataracts of a pure
black iris: their forms, bodies, congealed
bubbles boiling; the heat of displeasure

rising from their steps, sluggish drags
pacing to fetch the solids of the room,
voices echoing louder than the familiar

of the dingy space enveloping my glass
world: nine months from my first gasp,
dumped from a plastic bag to this space

by the only woman who cared for me,
her hair dyed auburn to keep the gray
at bay; she held orange pellets between

fingers with ruby nails, dropped them
into my oxygen; and with each gobble
taken, i spoke *i love you* with dancing

fins; i thought of her as my caretaker,
the woman who needed the thing to
love to justify her living. she is not

among the bustling crowds, eating

hors d'oeuvers, talking of *who gets*
whose money—the green, awkward

pellets humans never seem to share
but have too much of to eat. no one
cares enough to look inside my bowl

and see my lips moving, mimicking
the language a human might speak:
help!, like it's coming from a dream.

red noses

when i first saw rudolph, i thought
of all the times in p.e. when i stood
waiting to get picked for teams,

how i was always the kid who didn't
kick or throw the ball right, the one
who never made a shot in basketball

or caught a football, and couldn't tell
my teammates from my enemies,
how i'd pass the ball to anyone with

open arms, and how i longed to be
rudolph, with his shiny, red nose,
how it would express my own value.

i searched the face of everyone i met
for signs they could see it on my face,
saw in their eyes a certain kindness

when i smiled, even as they turned
away from me, and made friends
with a few who thought me normal,

so i searched thinking more could
find me normal, and my nose glowed
redder, brighter, there was a star

on my face, so i hoped some girl
would see that star as a beacon,
that she would draw my face like

a connect-the-dots constellation
in a secret notebook, the one
she keeps hidden from everyone,

or that my star could help guide
my lost parents to school events
like a buried treasure map.

i floated between small groups
of friends like temporary chains
pulling me in pentagram patterns,

and hid my face shyly to the floor
with every girl i had a crush on
unless i knew she didn't love me.

now, i've graduated college, first-gen.
after ditching the ceremony, i sit
alone in a room, playing video games

or writing sad poems, while my wife
laughs loudly in the living room with
her family, and i try to think of them

as *my* family, but the only family
i've had are friends, the pretenders
who love me well enough to fake

seeing the star painted on my face;
my wife and i walk out the door
past them, and it's cold, like winter,

she tells me again about her deviated

septum, how she hid in the bathroom
in elementary school to be away from

the other kids, how she never made
any real friends except her sisters,
and we stop in front of a streetlight

and rub our noses together in a kunik,
like two spaceships towing separate
stars to merge them into a new sun.

suitcase leaves

i wonder when i stopped finding the mundane
beautiful—when the trees became a burden
to the road, their decaying leaves
a peripheral sore to the windshield,
when the road became
a chore to execute stillness
instead of an avenue that could carry us
anywhere, when adventure stilted
like a moon aching to be witnessed
in the sun's balsamic afterglow.

i vow every day to no longer wait
on my own happiness, to no longer express disdain
for eating the fruit-pulp of labor,
to cry when i need to, taste my sweat with glee
rather than omniscient sorrow. i message my friends now
with an ominous joy, asking how they're doing,
not expecting any one answer:
good, i achieved x, and y is great—
instead knowing that deep in their bodies
an accumulation of adult anguish grows;
and knowledge of the future,
lying dormant in repetitions of the past,
the rubber follicles left post erasure:

i wonder how the road we're all
walking on has become damp, littered
with the promises we told ourselves:
soaking into our shoes,
our bodies breaking into leaves
eager to escape our suitcases.

black patches

when i submitted the poem to my grad class
that used a roller coaster as a metaphor
for being raped in foster care, my cohort
gawked at the abstraction: *how can*
a 3-year-old ride a roller coaster?

and only one of them
got it: *this poem is about*

abuse, isn't it? and i turned

red,
sank
into myself.

then their eyes raced over the page
for clarity, scanning for answers
i wouldn't give them. i wondered

if anyone could believe it happened
when even i doubted the memories
were real, fragmented with patches
of black sewn tight to cover up
the holes all around my brain,
a man with gray hair on a black,
leather couch, and a boy, *max,*
hiding with me in the bathroom.

i wondered how much i had hidden
in my writing, the things my mind
couldn't address. what could i say

about the voices?

they might not have looked at me
as some cliche form of *crazy*,
someone making excuses—making lies—
to excuse herself from extinction,

if i had just said, *i don't remember*
it all.
but people see others who say
i'm not crazy as if they *are*.

i can only tell others if the voices
let me; otherwise, it's
black patches.

i wish i would have let

my cohort cuddle up with me,
that i could have prepared them
for the sweat still dripping down
my back, let them run their hands
over my surface to soak it all up,

so i wouldn't still be stuck to that
couch, the way i am every time
i enter my head—that, instead
of running and hiding,

they could know what i wanted
to say through such an
imperfect,
extended metaphor

was my best attempt at leaving
that bathroom max and i hid in,

my best attempt at
displacing

myself:

the best poets are never

strangers

to those willing

to understand them.

animal memory / in class

we discussed bukowski's animal poems
and argued whether animals have souls.

i said i liked “a smile to remember” best
because it’s dark and has dead goldfish.

it made me think of this time as a kid
when i captured a lizard with a cage

then let it out only out to cut its tail
off since they always grow back, then

placed it in a bucket filled with water,
watched as it beat its feet in struggle.

when it escaped, i chased it through
the dirt to place it back in its cage,

but hovered the wooden cell over
its body and crushed it instead.

this is what happens when things
leave, i said. i felt like the goldfish

corpses being fed to the cats, the
boy and the mother being beaten.

but i felt most of all that the father
was the man i was to grow into;

i’ve grown into the mother instead,

and keep attending college just

like i did grade school, in silence,
wishing i had learned to smile.

the hunter's buck

the hunter lays the buck in the bed of his truck
like a lax swimsuit model posing playfully
for next month's *sports illustrated*, its light fur

embalmed in mangled sweat, skin natural
as roots, soft and unexposed, a pale floodlight
humming along the accents of its unbreathing

face; its eyes a lustrous black, reflective
of the light as though still grazed with life,
an apology for ever trespassing on hallowed

human ground; its tongue hanging obtusely
left, seducing the hunter into a translucent
state of glory, a vital fifteen-minutes of fame

as he sits behind the frame of his own painting,
the white strength of its antlers balancing him
like the ghost of orion beneath an oak tree.

dinosaur party

donning our stretched-out suits,
speckled gold, orange, and green,
obtuse t-rex arms, stegosaurus
spines, pterodactyl wings, we enter
a common waltz of salt-flat strangers
endeared by fellow faces of herbivores
and carnivores alike, a *christmas-truce*
from the wars we fight at home just
to stay uneaten and alive—we speak

anything but the human tongue:
grunts, roars, screeches, our cries
of what's before gone unexpressed,
the things we can't let go: it's better
that the doctors guide us, watch
us take turns as we fumble with
the coloring books and glow-balls
on the long table in front of us.

pretending we aren't what we are
seems easiest to me. i watch my body
as it watches everyone speak about
the people they love who cheated,
who died, who are dying, who abused,
were abused, who lost their minds.

here, language has lost itself;
we are all part of the same body,
the body of loss. and our bodies
have lost themselves to pain;
they return to the outside as we
return, wearing costume-skin.

iii.

the funeral

moon: stranded

“i didn’t want any flowers, i only wanted
to lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
how free it is, you have no idea how free—"
—sylvia plath

the earth should look
beautiful from the moon,
but the green and brown
land masses look like snot
clogging a draining sink.

i thought i could get away
from my family up here—
that people below would look
like scampering boogers
stained with bile-sickness,

but nothing visibly moves,
nothing breathes. i planted
tulip seeds below my feet,
hoping they would grow
and provide us oxygen.

for what she said the tulips
would eat away—i should
have listened. and the people
we both loved on that tiny
sphere, they should have

been better to us. i make
my bed now on the rocks

and dirt, turn my hands up,
and gaze in perfect silence
at the life we left behind.

time-napping

i'm a newborn that i can't picture
cradling, even once i become
the cradler, the cradler of lies
spouted into a drooling future,
severed from the moist placenta
that never fought to keep its grip;

my hands are hers, silly worms

tapping along my palms like
they'll break the dirt surface.

it's 1991. the hospital is empty,
no need to search for our mother's
face, then—she's gone—static
from the hallway tv and radio
a placebo heartbeat, white noise
rhythm the eye of a lost storm.

dis
connected:

the hallway is long, longer than
any hallway in any dream.

the next thirty years of my life
will scream *me*—they will be
hours of walking me to parks,
buying fast food and ice cream,
taking time to rewatch all our
favorite cartoons and movies.

i'll grow up with a father,
a father who will say, *never*
apologize for wanting love.

i'll grow up and watch her die,
both fatherless and fathered,

and love her the way
i couldn't love anyone.

beach wedding invitation

where i am bride, groom,
best man, woman, speech-giver,
audience, champagne, decor—
where i kiss myself softly, say,
all haikus are made of feathers,
as if birds delivered our poems,
as if i am—a procession, more
funeral than soul. i apologize for
giving myself so much, for wasting
the lives of those waiting to take
the spaces i have taken, for
wishing there was something
more beautiful than a silver
wedding, that images could live
without fear of tearing.

perhaps the sand on this beach
is silver, a place that is given,
its remainder shaped into stone
benches: come, sit, watch
the waves pulse, cup the water
in your hands—we can settle
together, here, on this plane;
we can love each other like
lovers won't in storybooks:
princess and princess, queen
and jester, each word spoken
a kiss to the heart, our bodies
blankets of trust; the sea,
it can shift the stone to dust;
we can fade with it, become

only what is natural to us,
and make space for those
who will grow beyond us.

gender mirror

"not as she is, but as she fills his dream"
—christina rossetti

her face is a renaissance painting
separate from (his) body, soft-toned,
belongs to the woman (that i am)
who seals it away from this world,

who beats her belly with her fists
(*his* fists) in the hope of breaking it,
who tears from herself the outline
of an hourglass from (his) broadness,

who drives her hand into the mirror
and plucks (his) body of dead flower,
rips its belly-fat with clawed fingers,
replaces it with smooth, skinny love,

who scans herself as a grocery-worker,
tags (his) body with the price of *error,*
please restock, who won't look at (him)
and even dare mouth the word *love*,

who offers each day to take the place
of (his) body in the mirror just to see
herself as she wants to be, as she is,
who paints her body as she dreams.

ulysses knew

"...for my purpose holds
to sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
of all the western stars, until i die."
—alfred lord tennyson

that her journey must end
in water—
at 13-years, i said
to my cousin,
my penis is shrinking,
that it would soon
plop off, dissipate
into drops
of water.
we walked
from mom's pool
to the neighborhood
sidewalk,
still dripping
from our swim trunks
when we pulled
at our waistbands,
pretending
we could see
progress,
that the *undesired pieces*
of ourselves,
soaking
into the gray,
leaked
all the way through

to the dirt.

it's okay, he said, *we'll lose*
ourselves
and feed the trees.

i dreamt of being
a woman
the way a toddler
dreams of being
a fireman,
already filling
the role,
until adulthood
when she either
daydreams at her job
about what she could
have been,
or she is.

and he was kind enough
to pretend with me,
because he knew
what all children
eventually
forget:

that what we carry
is what we become,

that what we carry
is there
from its beginning,

the way a story
is told infinitely,
the way it must return
to its first sentence,

to create the tale
that makes it

whole.

so i return
to the sea
of my original
body,
the place ulysses
called *home,*

and embark
with sails stitched
from my own
skin.

the changing room

“and i feel like i’m naked
in front of the crowd,
cuz these words are my diary
screamin’ out loud,
and i know that you’ll use them
however you want to”
—anna nalick

i am recreating myself
the way a painter recreates
the dreams of those she loves,
every brush stroke a follicle
of ovarian light escaping
from the eyes she’s envisioned,
basic shapes pouring from them:
triangles, circles, squares,
each with comatose faces,
hanging from a theater ceiling
by strings, twirling, a rainbow
metronome refracting light
into matter. as i present myself,
she tells me all about my smile,
how it’s always been the same
as hers. the theater is dark.
no one is watching but us.

mother, golem

'¿por qué di en agregar a la infinita
serie un símbolo más? ¿por qué a la vana
madeja que en lo eterno se devana,
di otra causa, otro efecto y otra cuita?'
—jorge luis borges

on a patio of rotting, gray wood,
in the backyard of my childhood,
i parse the hair from your face,
finish by carving your new name:
life, love. with this, i've reinvented
the names you wore in life: *absent,*
loveless, names that no longer fit
your skull. come, mother: let us
sit and reminisce. i've given you
life so we might talk once again.

i remember, as a child, watching you
pick roses from the backyard bush,
how the thorns pricked your fingers
and you laughed, raising your palm
to me like the blood was a prayer
and my smile was the only thing
that could save us: now, as i poke
holes in your clay fingers, you don't
bleed, only stare stoically through
me, so i point my finger up to the

stars. this is where you'd point out
the constellations to me; remember
how you'd reach up and trace them

with a finger, say their names? *orion,*
the little dipper, the big, andromeda?
how i'd say, *you have to be pretending,*
because nobody could remember all
those names? now, i see the shapes
you outlined in the stars; how night
was born from all its given names.

the pool

were we on the water, or in it?
like the tallest rows of a coliseum,
we sat as if vexed in compliment
of our familiar blood, examining
the water like an abandoned ball pit,
your body swaying, mom, your face
still and young, clean like museum bones,
your eyes attentive to the parts of you
radiating in us, our joys pulsating
like a bizarre, alien light—we knew only
movies with you, movie after movie,
everything one could teach us came
from a movie. to say i love you isn't

enough. i say it anyway. back in time,
in this dream, we are young. i wish
i can teach you what love is, as if
i ever learned myself. something i knew
as a child tells me i would have known,
then, how to teach you, in a way i couldn't
now; i cradle that child's responsibility,
and the child, one in each wrinkling arm,

with the same care as a sparrow
regurgitating worms to her young;

are we swimming? your face bobs up,
bobs up, then down. from the bottom
of the pool, a sparrow ascends, nearly

pierces the surface with drawn wings,

but morning comes. i wake, and think
to tell my wife i've had another dream
about my mom, but sit with it instead:

i tell her later, when i look busy playing
games on my computer, so i can retreat
comfortably to a place of forgetting: *you
should write it as a poem*, she says.

in the poem, i don't include the small
black book, with *MYOPSIS* in gold font
on the cover, and the list of rich people
inside of it who attended all those secret
parties, nor the explanation you gave

when i asked what *MYOPSIS* is, and how
you hesitated shyly before answering.

i only think i should have ended the poem
earlier, perhaps just as the dream ended,
when the sparrow nearly broke the surface,

only there never was a sparrow;
i made it up, so that the dream
might sound prettier than it was.

sisco & mia

when mom returned from oregon,
she and my stepdad brought back
an african gray they got for $300
because *he was such a good deal,*
and the first thing they did was
clip his wings, stuff him in a cage
with an array of plastic bobbles
and wobbly perches. she thought

teaching him a name would be easy:
sisco! she repeated, not looking
at him, *sisco!* as she stomped along
the living room, scatter-brained
and searching for love in vacant
places, under couches, between
barstools, drawn inside the ashes
on the coffee table by angels,
so what he learned was *fuck! ass!*
and her laugh, like her stomach
was wrapping the room in a hug
whenever she was up to *no good.*

after a while, *sisco*! started screaming
before and after his curse words: *stop!*
bop! crack! sounds that should have been
cries, sounds he was happy to make.

when i walked through the front door,
ash littered the floor, papers piled
everywhere, the house quiet and cold;
i stood barefoot and quiet on the tile,

listening, and i heard mom's cries, *stop!*
        something metal and heavy thrown,
bop! then, skin impacting skin, *crack!*

and, not long after, *sisco!* disappeared:
        mom said her friend left the door open,
that *he must have flown out,* begged
        my siblings and i to search for him.

when mom was diagnosed, i wanted
        to leave her alone in the hospital
with her brain tumor; i wanted to stay
        alone in my home and blame her.
i went to a waiting room and listened
        to the family i never talk to talk
about the good times, heard mom's
        laugh fill the waiting room, selfishly
taking the space with her loud hug,
        when others there were also dying.

i said goodbye, of course, and she
        walked me to the elevator, held
me, the way she'd never held me
        as a child, and cried, said she
loved me. i thought, leaving her
        like that, she'd haunt me; when

she passed, her spirit filled my room,
        ate me with an angry scream,
reminded me that i was the reason
        we hadn't spoken more than once
in five years. i thought of myself
        as that cancer, named by science
as a disease understood enough

to treat but not enough to cure.

like in kindergarten when mrs. piles
had the class write our names, *mia!*
i knew my name, had heard others
say it, but it was a made-up sound,
a diagnosis for the condition of living:
on paper, i spelled my name, *aic!*
letters i'd learned to write, knowing
no others: *mia!* mrs. piles said,
mia? is this yours? why did you
write your name like this? because,
mom never said my name, mrs. piles;
i looked to her for my name.

the funeral

i didn't go to mom's funeral. it wasn't because
my family was there. it wasn't because i didn't
want to go. i looked at the picture of my cousins,
my brother, my sister, all huddled together
in black sadness: some were arm in arm, others
standing off to the side. every one of them
was old. i wondered how their faces carried
another death as if it were an average curse,
why their smiles didn't tell of loss as pictures
in a storybook would tell of anger, in green
fire, in skies of rusted leather. their smiles
dragged, as if they were a brown sack of fruit
lugged across white dirt, drug along by *death,*
a skeleton draped in stereotypical black cloak
with scythe, its back hunched from old age,
from ceaseless work.
i didn't see mom's body,
her brain rotten from the tumor; maybe i should
have gone to see her one last time when she was
alive, watched as she lost her mind, yelled at
the walls. i might have asked about the childhood
i can't remember, so she could pretend to forget
again.

i remember looking at the heroes
in movies and cartoons, eyes glued
to the tv during all the days
i awaited her return: the brave,
noble-hearted ones,
thinking, *i'll never be like them*,
the hero she'll come back to.

i imagine looking over her coffin,
kissing her cheek,
saying to her corpse:
here is the proof i was
right.

father tree

your branches are arms that
never held me, lean and stiff
as a photograph. all i know
of you is unmoving, a face
matching mine like a clone;

your eyes carry that same
hatred i had at sixteen, and
your eyes carry that same
weight i hold in my thirties.
your mother was adopted,

just like me, and you left
home early. what was she
like? and, after you stabbed
that man in the heart, what
did you feel? our genes are

tied by accidents, by people
we love failing us, by our
own failures. i am a criminal
in my own right: the police
should come and arrest me,

the madwoman speaking
to your tree. you got away
from your crimes, and our
family got away from us.
all i have left are words

in a newspaper: your case,

your freedom, your move
to two different states,

a current nevada address,
and two possible numbers
that i'm too afraid to call.

calligraphy: adoption

i no longer find beauty in simple things:
the adopted child playing with his parents
outside the local ice cream shop reminds me
of what i've lost: a flock of eighteen crows

once landed in the middle of my childhood
street to look up to the hazy afternoon
sky—no cars caused them to scatter
before they communed to leave, following

an ageless call: each knew the flock's
thought, one mind, absent cry or gesture,
as they ascended, one black v. if the whole
world caught fire, formed a plume of smoke,

i hope that smoke would shape a heart
and that it would expand to encompass
the atmosphere of the earth. now, i look

at this child and his family, and i pray
that a flock of crows loves them enough
to one day strangle their senses, to set

the world ablaze for them, so that love
is something none of them must hope for,
but feel, accept, as a body does with hunger,

and hope that a young poet, an adoptee,
can write a poem some child will read,
tell their chosen family about, will say,

a flock of crows in the street
means fires sprouting everywhere,

and the burning isn't so bad
as long as we're together.

the opera suicide

a robber holds a gun to my head
in a stereotypical night alley,
demands only my notebook

of poems as he pummels through
my pockets, breathes into my neck:
i tell him
i can empathize, that i'm defiant
of silly laws and all, too,
and that i'm just as poor; he says,

the conundrum isn't stated verbatim;
rather, the syntaxes of diluted waters
have materialized into a black ether.

interesting, i say, and motion him,
palm up, to the couch to lie down:
i will pretend to be his therapist.

he rocks back and forth, a hungry ghost
suckling his own ectoplasm, hugging
his knees. then his spirit leaves his body,
then floats behind and spoons his body.

the spirit apologizes for eating the cake:

i don't know who the cake was meant for,
but the frosting was so pretty. it reminded
me of my childhood, which wasn't pretty,
so eating it seemed most reasonable.

i nod, as if i'm taking notes:
and the notebook?

oh, yes, the body says, *i won't eat*
your poems. after all, they remind me
of this opera i heard once: a woman
was alone in the dark, center stage,
singing in an undiscovered language,
a song which sounded almost a mix
between a church choir and hard rock:
it wasn't religious, but it was spiritual.
did you see the opera as a child?
all that matters is whether
or not you saw it as a child.

i did! i did, i did, i did!
now, get it out of my head!

of course, i say, of course.
now, please, remove it
from our heads.